

It’s all happenin’ at “The Zoo”



Photo by Mr. John Rowland

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AWFC Public Affairs

Fondly referred to as “The Petting Zoo” by the majority of Team Nellis members, the front and rear display areas of the 547th Intelligence Squadron building, 3811 Duffer Drive, recently received a new addition.

Joining a restored 1952 Russian-built MiG-17 Fresco is a circa 1959 SU-7 Fitter fighter/bomber. Both are part of a larger collection of predominately Soviet-built jets, antiaircraft weaponry, tanks, ground arms and a Russian helicopter used for training purposes by the Adversary Threat Training Facility.

Lt. Col. John Sowdon, Commander of the 547th IS, and Mr. Bernard Zager, Chief of Plans and Programs and Manager of the Adversary Threat Training Facility, are deservedly proud of the more than 80 pieces of foreign military equipment on display in and to the rear of the facility.

A major portion of the equipment now available for viewing by the public was classified until just a few years ago.

“This facility is one of the premier showcases on Nellis,” Mr. Zager said. “Approximately 18,000 people visited us last year and that number will hopefully go higher this year. Our aircraft and weaponry are a daily reminder of the constant threat still out there.”

In addition to the 25-30 airmen from the Nellis Airmen Center who are escorted through the facility twice monthly as part of their adversary threat training, guided tours are available for scheduling for groups of 10 or more. Both Col. Sowdon and Mr. Zager have spoken to foreign tour members who are familiar with the equipment on display at the facility.

“We get foreign troops in here who really operated that equipment and can help us understand how it works,” said Senior Airman Mike Muhliesen, Threat Presentation Analyst and Senior Briefer. Airman Muhliesen also escorts tour groups around the facility, explaining the history and capabilities of the various pieces of equipment.

According to information provided by Col. Sowdon, the MiG-17’s claim to historical importance rests largely on its use by the Vietnamese Air Force (NVAF)

units between 1965 and 1973. The Soviet-supplied MiG-17’s were one of the most important NVAF fighters during most of the war, proving a challenge for U.S. fighters. That experience was instrumental in shaping the later development of the F-14, F-15 and F-16 aircraft in use today.

“The MiG was responsible for shooting down U.S. aircraft during the Vietnam War,” said Col. Sowdon. “Because it was so maneuverable and small, it was very hard to see.”

The MiG-17 is a small, subsonic aircraft with good maneuvering capabilities, reaching a speed of Mach .94. Despite having a high sortie rate, its mission time was limited to only 20 minutes and engine life to only 50 hours. The aircraft has two 23-mm cannons and one 37-mm cannon. The number of MiG-17’s has dwindled rapidly in recent years, but it still remains in use.

“North Korea still uses the MiG as a front line bomber and the SU-7 is still used by several countries,” Col. Sowdon said. “Both are fairly typical of what Russia built at the time. They’re simple, tough aircraft. They last a long time — which is why they’re still flying.”

The MiG-17 at Nellis has been painted in a scheme currently used by the North Korean Air Force and is emblazoned with the number 547.

While the SU-7 single-seat, ground attack fighter has been phased out of service in the Soviet Air Force, it remains operational in the air forces of Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, North Korea and Syria and is used for training purposes in some of those countries.

Criticized for its poor payload/range capabilities, the SU-7 nevertheless has excellent handling qualities, maneuverability, simplicity and unbreakable toughness. It became the standard fighter-bomber of the Soviet Air Force, Warsaw Pact allies and developing third-world nations in the 1960s. This aircraft reached speeds of Mach 1.6.

The SU-7 has two internal 30-mm guns and can carry a variety of armament on its wings. One procedure used during ground attack missions was to turn one of the rocket pods around backwards and use it to suppress antiaircraft artillery fire after their attack run.

Opened 23 years ago with only a few pieces of antiaircraft weapons and artillery guns, the facility plans to continue to acquire more equipment and expand the facility as necessary. Inside the main display hall hang flags repre-

senting the countries that still present a potential threat to the United States, including China, North Korea, Iran, Bosnia, and Iraq. According to Mr. Zager, these reminders are all part of the awareness training program.

“This collection was started to help our air crews by letting them learn about this foreign equipment,” Mr. Zager said. “With this equipment and training, our aircrews have been able to survive a lot of conflicts.”

To the rear of the facility, which includes a large hanger capable of housing two fighters, is the outside display area. In addition to a restored MiG-23 Flogger, the facility has an intact Soviet MI-24 Hind helicopter. While none of the weapons systems are operational now, several of the vehicles can still be driven.

The collection also includes an SA-2 surface-to-air missile system identical to the one used to shoot down Gary Powers over Russia in the 1960s and an SA-6, the type of missile which shot down Captain Scott O’Grady over Bosnia in 1994.

Participating in the restoration of the SU-7 were Staff Sgt. Pat Winchell, Nellis Air Force Base; Staff Sgt. Chris Eckhard, a reservist from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina, who had been with the Nellis crew since June; and Senior Airman Shane Aldrich, Nellis Air Force Base. All three are Vehicle Maintenance Technicians, according to Mr. Zager.

Both Col. Sowdon and Mr. Zager were lavish in their praise of the three men for their work on the SU-7 and other pieces at the facility. “We’re very fortunate to have these unique individuals here,” Mr. Zager said. “They’re getting the chance to do things others never do — to experience things others never have.”

Col. Sowdon said work on the aircraft was started before dawn every morning in order to beat the debilitating heat of the southern Nevada summer.

“It took a lot of work and determination to do this in the harsh heat,” he explained, adding it took two to three weeks to prepare the aircraft before its Iraqi paint scheme, including the Arabic number 547, could be applied. According to Col. Sowdon, one of the reasons the fighter was repainted was because it bore Polish markings when it was acquired.

“When this fighter was active, Poland was a member of the Warsaw Pact, and now is a member of NATO,” he explained.

According to Mr. Zager, the conditions of the weapons and aircraft acquired by the facility varies.

“Most need reassembly and restoration,” he said, adding the facility also has a MiG-21 and MiG-23.

Staff Sgt. Winchell and his crew are responsible for the reassembly, restoration and maintenance of all the displays at the facility, often using books and pictures to get a general idea of how a piece of equipment or an aircraft should look.

“Sometimes we fly by the seat of our pants because there are no manuals with these things,” Staff Sgt. Winchell laughed,” but we try to make it as realistic as possible and we try to keep all of it looking good.”

While both Staff Sgt. Winchell and Airman Aldrich will miss working with Staff Sgt. Eckhard, who recently returned to Seymour Johnson AFB, they truly enjoy their work.

“We’ve got the best job in the Air Force,” Airman Aldrich said.

The next big project for the crew will be the restoration of a MiG-29, which should be delivered in a few weeks, according to Mr. Zager.

The jet, classified as a front line fighter, will be the most modern piece of equipment at the facility.

“That’s what we try to have on display, something still being used as a threat,” said Mr. Zager. “It’s all part of the threat awareness training.”

Those interested in tour information may call the facility Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., at 652-7846 or 652-2051.



Above, crew members Staff Sgt. Pat Winchell and Senior Airman Chris Eckhard ready the materials needed to begin applying the new paint job to the SU-7.



Left and below, Airman Shane Aldrich applies the new Iraqi paint scheme, complete with the Arabic numerals 547, to the aircraft.



Below left, Staff Sgt. Chris Eckhard takes a break from the strenuous restoration work on the SU-7 now on display in front of the 547th Intelligence Center.

Staff Sgt. Winchell and his crew used a polyurethane finish on the SU-7 instead of an acrylic-based finish, which should add 2 to 3 years in durability and thereby extending the life of the equipment. The preparations made to the aircraft before the final painting process could begin took approximately two to three weeks. Most of the equipment on display at the Intelligence Center has been painted to match the equipment of those countries still viewed as a threat to the United States.

